

Expressions of cancer through art

“Memphis artist wins second best in United States art competition.”

By Thomas Jordan
THE BEST TIMES

Memphis artist Janna Bernstein drew pictures depicting the storm of emotions she felt during the treatment of her breast cancer, but the drawings, rather than being seen as instructive as she had intended, were labeled offensive by some.

Galleries at two local clinics – she wouldn’t name them – described her art as grotesque and refused to display them.

“I had intended for them to be educational. And I really thought that doctors’ offices or clinics would be interested, and it was distressing to me that places saw them as upsetting because I saw them as honest.”

The 10 drawings are intended to be graphic, she said. One is of a woman receiving radiation. Another is Bernstein’s impression of how a woman’s body feels during radiation.

The reaction to Bernstein’s work so distressed her that she “shelved” the drawings. She said she was reluctant to enter an art contest sponsored by the pharmaceutical firm Eli Lilly and Company called “Oncology on Canvas: Expressions of a Woman’s Cancer Journey” because she feared another rejection of her work.

“The idea that I couldn’t put these pictures in a show was still gnawing at me.”

Despite her misgivings, Bernstein, 54, decided to enter the contest. But she didn’t submit one of the figure drawings she did during therapy.

“I wasn’t thrilled about doing it. I thought, OK, we’ll just see what happens. It was a pretty powerful rejection, and it kind of colored whether or not I really wanted to send one.”

Her entry was judged second best in United States competition and will be on



Janna Bernstein outside WingsGallery, where her piece is on display

display with 25 other pieces in the Wings Cancer Foundation’s WingsGallery, 100 North Humphreys Blvd., through Oct. 14.

“Oncology on Canvas” received more than 400 submissions from 23 countries. The categories included oil, photography, acrylic, pastel and charcoal.

The exhibit, unveiled at London’s Royal College of Art in December 2004, is on an international tour.

Discovery

The first indication that Bernstein, an art teacher at Kingsbury Middle High School, might have a tumor came while she was on a month-long Fulbright scholarship to Japan in June of 2000. She discovered a small knot in her breast.

“I was doing a self-exam, and I found it and I knew. It felt different. I would state, that as a case for every woman who has the slightest inkling that she’s found something that’s different, to believe it and to respond to it because I knew. It’s distinct. It’s very different. Every thing that they say about self-exam and finding a spot of cancer that is hard, that it doesn’t move, that it stays in the same place is exactly accurate. It did not move.”

She decided to wait until she returned to Memphis to see a doctor, but the situation at home forced another delay. Her mother, Aline Bernheim, gravely ill with pancreatic cancer, had to be hospitalized.

In fact, Bernstein considered not traveling to Japan because of her mother’s illness. But, she said, her mother and three siblings persuaded her to accept the scholarship.

Back in Memphis, Bernstein stayed with her mother in the hospital until she died on July 23 at age 80.

During that time she forgot about the lump.

“I didn’t think about it again until a friend invited me over to get into her hot tub. I was putting on a bath-

ing suit and I thought, ‘I remember when I did that breast exam in Japan. I wonder if that spot is still there.’ As soon as I thought that and felt the spot, I had this sick feeling in my stomach. I told my friend I’m going to call the doctor tomorrow.”

She did, and a couple of days later, on a Friday, she had a biopsy.

“That was the hardest thing in the world. I had to wait all weekend.”

When she heard the diagnosis, she was frantic. Not only had her mother died of cancer, she had buried four other relatives who were claimed by cancer in the preceding nine years. And every one of her father’s three brothers had died of cancer.

Making Strides Against Breast Cancer Walk

The American Cancer Society's Making Strides Against Breast Cancer Walk will begin in Jefferson Davis Park downtown on Oct. 8.

The five-mile non-competitive walk is the American Cancer Society's signature event during National Breast Cancer Awareness Month in October.

Last year more than 2,000 walkers raised more than \$150,000 to help fund breast cancer research, education, advocacy and patient support programs.

"I walk in Making Strides Against Breast Cancer because the American

Cancer Society was there for me at a time when I needed someone with knowledge," said Sue Binnie, an American Cancer Society volunteer.

"As a breast cancer survivor, it makes a huge difference to realize that people you don't even know come out and sacrifice their energy and resources to support and help in the fight against cancer."

Registration is at 8 a.m. in Jefferson Davis Park. The walk begins at 9 a.m.



The American Cancer Society is the nationwide, community-based voluntary health organization dedicated to eliminating cancer as a major health problem by preventing cancer, saving lives, and diminishing suffering from cancer.

For more information about Making Strides Against Breast Cancer or to register for the event, call the American Cancer Society at 278-2091 or visit www.cancer.org/stridesonline.

On Aug. 17, Bernstein had a lumpectomy, surgery to remove the tumor and some tissue. She said she was told there was an 85 percent chance that the cancer wouldn't recur. With radiation and chemotherapy, the odds would improve to 95 percent.

Bernstein, who is divorced, met with her three daughters, Rachel Kannady, 24, Miriam Claire Bernstein, 21, and Ruth Bernstein, 17, to discuss post-surgical therapy options.

"I said this is what's going on and this is what they've told me, and I need you to help me make a decision because my decision is really based on what y'all are willing to help me with because I can't do this by myself."

She said Ruth Bernstein told her she didn't understand the question, saying, "We want it to be 100 percent."

That told her what she needed to know, Bernstein said.

Healing

During the months of radiation and chemotherapy, she turned to art, a lifelong pursuit, for comfort and self-expression.

After high school, she entered Washington University in St. Louis, majoring in art. She returned to Memphis and got two master's degrees from the University of Memphis, one in painting and another

"During the months of radiation and chemotherapy, she turned to art, a lifelong pursuit, for comfort and self-expression."



Janna Bernstein's graphite piece – "Healing" shows an uplifted wing.

in art history.

Then she married and had her three daughters.

In 1991, Bernstein and her husband divorced and she began teaching and exhibiting her work. That also was the year her favorite uncle died of stomach cancer, the first in the string of cancer deaths in her family.

At the same time she was asked to submit an entry in the "Oncology on Canvas"

contest, Bernstein said the Wings Cancer Foundation recruited her to decorate egg shakers, which are ultra-light plastic rattlers, for the foundation's annual Kaleidoscope Celebration of Life for people touched by cancer.

She was teaching art at Bruce Elementary at the time and thought: "This is a great teaching tool."

Bernstein took 300 of the 500 shakers. She and her students worked out designs intended to be uplifting and painted them on the shakers.

"When I was doing the work with my kids, we talked about illness, about death."

They also discussed symbolism and what images might be inspiring, such as an eagle or a bee.

Bernstein hesitantly decided to enter the "Oncology on Canvas" contest.

The entry that won her second place in the United States competition came from the egg shaker project, not from her drawings of cancer therapy.

"I picked one of my examples I created in front of my kids."

The three-dimensional piece in graphite – "Healing" – is an uplifted wing and the breast of a headless bird with six feathers stitched over a tear in the paper, signifying surgery or repair.

"The wing's repaired, so can it fly?" she asks.